DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 341 FL 013 387

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TITLE Some Solutions to the Problems of Teaching the Indochinese.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (16th, Honolulu, HI, May 1-6, 1982).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Dialogs (Language); *English (Second Language); *Indochinese; Learning Activities; Listening Skills; Receptive Language; *Refugees; Second Language Instruction; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

The Indochinese student brings a unique set of linguistic, cultural, and psychological problems to the English as a second language (ESL) classroom. Indochinese refugees may be illiterate in their first language, lack the prior education needed to cope with a formalized learning situation, have traditional learning and study patterns that interfere with learning a language orally, and have excessive tension which impedes ability to hear and produce language. Techniques for working with Indochinese refugees to overcome these problems in the ESL classroom are described. For students with no prior knowledge of English, a slower paced and less threatening classroom atmosphere must be provided, with an emphasis on receptive learning through listening activities. Students with previous academic experience in their native language should be presented with analytical activities in addition to oral creative opportunities. Intermediate ESL students who are comfortable with classroom drills and dialogs must learn to comprehend realistic discourse. Exercises such as one-sided dialogs and strip stories are suggested. (Author/RW)

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SOME SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEMS OF TEACHING THE INDOCHINESE

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When we first started working with Indochinese refugees in the summer of 1975, we became discouraged because they seemed to be making so little progress in learning to speak English. Even more disheartening, we saw that the initial nervous tension that they had brought into the language learning classroom was developing into severe stress and at times paralyzing anxiety. The teaching techniques that we were using and which had been successful with other populations, did not seem to be meeting the needs of the refugees.

Compelled by our sense of frustration to step back and analyze our teaching practices, we came to several realizations about the language learning process vis-a-vis the Indochinese and subsequently altered our teaching strategies to accommodate these insights.

First of all we realized that we were not teaching the Indochinese but rather a mosaic of cultures, backgrounds, languages and individuals. Gradually we began to fit these individuals into several different and identifiable groups of language students, each group having different linguistic and emotional needs and learning styles. Once we had made these distinctions, moreover, we were able to reassess our teaching/learning environment and make some adjustments in teaching

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methods to meet the needs of each group. Secondly, we realized that our primary focus in the classroom should be on the students and their needs rather than on the language. And finally, we gained a stronger sense that learning a second language as an adult is a tension-filled activity. Our primary goal as teachers to these students would have to be to help them reduce this tension to a manageable level so that the long process of language acquisition could occur.

Reducing tension is especially critical for the students whom we had identified as Group One - the Indochinese zero-level speaker of English. These students arrive in the classroom much like a non-swimmer approaching a vast ocean. They are overwhelmed or even terrified by the limitless horizons and unexplored depths and the more they learn of the power of the sea the more they become intimidated by its vastness. The teacher appears and tries to help but the students soon realize that the teacher is one with the sea and is leading them in over their heads. Their reaction is too often to withdraw to the safety of the shore - their known first language. They may later venture out for an occasional wade in the shallows but give up trying to master the depths.

For those of us who learned to swim at a later age this analogy has a poignant meaning. We can remember the feeling of helplessness when our feet couldn't touch the bottom and our only desire was to get to the shore. Only with time, patience and help from an understanding teacher were we able to control our terror and accomplish the goal of learning to swim.

But how do we as teachers often greet these "non-swimmers" in the linguistic sea of English? By the end of lesson one in a typical beginning level ESL class, the students are often expected to be able to introduce themselves, correctly identify ten to fifteen objects and put the names of these objects into a sentence such as "It's a . . . " or "This is a . . . " Very soon into the chapter they may be asked to read a short dialog and perhaps write some sentences. Some students are apt to be almost overcome with the pressure. Others, in so far over their heads, find the stress level so intense that they tune out and sit staring at the teacher with a fixed smile of noncomprehension on their faces. When we do an extended workshop for teachers of beginning level Indochinese students we often begin with a short shock lesson in which the participants have the opportunity to learn another language in a manner consistent with most beginning level texts. By using fast paced drilling and repetition to achieve correct pronunciation and correct responses, we see the anxiety level increase for our workshop "students" and many give up before our lesson is completed or feel extremely frustrated by the end of the exercise.

Our message is simple. If this is the reaction of trained second language teachers, sensitive to the elements of language and comfortable in a learning environment, what must be the feelings and frustrations of untrained language learners, who are often uneducated as well and for whom the school setting itself is strange and unfamiliar? Since these students lack this background experience of formal education they are thus,

at whatever biological age, still in need of readiness activities for learning English.

In addition, most of these students have not heard much English and thus initially lack the competence to hear and distinguish the sounds of the spoken language. This lack of familiarity with the sound system of English in turn limits the students' ability to begin speaking the language intelligibly. Requiring the students to speak from the first class meeting, before they have heard much English, too often results in increased student tension and the production of unintelligible sounds. Allied to this is the fear of failure and the fear of being left behind. The fast-paced tempo of many beginning classes leaves these students tense (if not terrified), unable to progress and consequently ripe for leaving the water altogether for the safety of the shore.

Language learning itself is a tension-filled activity and we, as teachers, cannot hope to dissolve all anxiety. However, if we consider the whole learner - with his psychological and emotional needs as well as his cognitive ones - we can begin to help the students reduce their tension to a manageable level. How can stress, tension, apprehension be reduced and lessened? A slower-paced, less threatening classroom atmosphere must be structured. To do this, emphasis must be shifted to <u>receptive</u> learning until the student becomes ready to <u>produce</u> language orally. We feel that only through a protracted period of graded receptive classroom listening preceding speaking can the zero-level student begin to gain proficiency.

Receptive learning then centers on listening. If we observe how a child develops his mother tongue, we will note that long before a child begins using oral language for communication, he is developing listening skills. A child spends a good one to two years listening and experimenting with vocalizing - making sounds which, by the way, are never labelled as wrong and corrected. In fact, they are often reinforced! A child speaks when ready and then is rarely required to speak. He tries out a few words until he feels confident to undertake more complex and communicative sentences.

Although the time frame for receptive listening must be shortened for a second language learner, many of the features of first language acquisition can be incorporated into the beginning level second language classroom. For second language learning too has been shown to be a developmental process, a process in which the ability to speak follows an extended period of exposure to and internalization of the language through listening. What we were seeing in our zero-level students were learners who had not heard enough English to be developmentally ready to begin speaking it.

As we began to design activities appropriate for what we were discovering about these beginning students, we naturally focused on listening tasks. In doing this, we chose to start with numbers. There were several reasons for this choice.

- numbers are a universal feature of human experience and thus of language;
- the meaning of numbers is immediately comprehended;

- students seem to enjoy learning and using numbers;
- numbers can provide a useful foundation for subsequent language learning activities for beginning students.

The problems for these zero-level Indochinese speakers are often compounded because the student is illiterate. This illiteracy, moreover, can actually mean one of two handicaps - that is, the student can be illiterate in his own language or he can be literate in his native language which does not use the roman alphabet and thus unprepared to begin reading in English. Whichever is the case, this illiteracy increases the problems of learning English - even spoken English. Textbooks assume that the oral can come through the written while literacy texts presume a familiarity with spoken English. We need to recognize that we are talking about two different skill areas which are difficult to address simultaneously. An ideal situation would allow for the spoken language to develop first (as it did in first language development); reading could then be introduced using the oral language base.

The uneducated, illiterate older refugee students thus have many hurdles to overcome. Even if some progress can be made, many times these students remain limited by their lack of ability to generalize, to hypothesize - to perform all of those skills that take a language learner beyond basic survival dialogs into the gradual mastery of the language in all its complexity. These are the students whose English may forever be "broken" and with these students we teachers need to know when to "let them go"; that is, when the students have reached

the outer parameters of what they can gain from the classroom and for whom continued attendance in the classroom may actually be detrimental to their self-image and to their language speaking ability.

Students whom we identified as belonging in Group Two, however, are those who often have an impressive backgound of prior education and who come to the language classroom confident of their ability to succeed as students. This confidence frequently masks a problem for these students in the ESL classroom - a problem caused by interference from previous schooling, especially previous language learning. In the first wave of immigration in 1975 these students comprised the majority we saw but there are still some of these educated refugees arriving today.

Most of these students have a prior knowledge or smattering of English and/or French, learned in a formal, grammar-translation method. Products of a rigidly structured school system in which rote memory and copying of information were required, these students bring this preferred, grammar-based learning style to the ESL classroom. Thus when this group of students is presented with an oral method, their response is often frustration, anger or at times open hostility to the learning process. Hardly the optimum classroom environment.

For these students of Group Two we have been led to a compromise - to a method which combines an analytical approach with oral, creative opportunities. We use as our catalyst pictures

and the procedure which we follow can be briefly summarized as follows.

After showing a picture to all of the students in the class, the teacher elicits first the nouns and then the verbs from the students. This is done by pointing to various features of the picture. One student lists these words on the board and the other students have the option of copying the words into their notebooks if they wish. Then pointing to selected words but without speaking, the teacher indicates that a student is to frame a question using those words. The question is then asked of another student who answers and then in turn questions another student. For example, when the teacher would point to "boy", "sit" and "steps", the student would respond, "Is the boy sitting on the steps?" This procedure continues until all of the students have asked and answered the question. Then the teacher points to another set of words and the process begins again.

In devising this technique we owe a debt to two features of the Silent Way philosophy which influenced us - the dictum to concentrate on the student while the student concentrates on the language and the fact that teacher silence can bring about student talk. The advantages to the students in using this technique include the facts that:

1. the students are looking up front to follow the exercise - they are not buried in their books and yet they still have the opportunity to read and write;
2. what the students are talking about revolves around the

words that they themselves have chosen and elicited from each other - utilizing the collective knowledge of the class;

3. there is room for individual response/creativity and yet it is much more structured than "free talk";
4. the students are talking to each other while the teacher is there as an onlooker and guide;
5. the picture provides a focus to the lesson that all can see and share - and the students seem to like the pictures and learn from them.

Students in Group Three have learned to feel secure in the tightly structured routines of the classroom but often seem unable to make the transition from dialog repetition and manipulation to creating responses in a conversation. One reason for this is that with a dialog students soon learn that they do not have to listen. And again, at this level, students need to listen before they can successfully communicate.

When we as teachers attempt to teach "listening" in the intermediate level classroom, however, too often we tend to view this language skill very narrowly - restricting listening comprehension tasks solely to listening for facts. Although this is a valuable skill for the students to develop, in the communicative demands of the real world, students must be able to listen and respond to tone, intention and context as well. To insure that students learn to do this, exercises and activities need to be devised that give students the chance to

listen to realistic discourse and to both comprehend and respond to what they have heard.

One technique that allows for this development is the one-sided conversation. With one-sided conversations, the students are given the opportunity to listen to realistic dialogs. However, they hear only one side of the interchange so that in class, as in conversations outside of class, they must supply the missing half of the dialog. In so doing, the students are given the opportunity to develop the ability to project and anticipate what is going to be said. They can thus learn to grasp the broad contextual framework of the discourse of which each individual utterance is a part.

A second difficulty for students in Group Three is that the students confuse knowing <u>about</u> English (which they know well) with knowing English. Thus a student can know a lot about English and still find communication severely impeded because of pronunciation and comprehension problems. The student will struggle with the pronunciation of a particular word and not grasp the fact that communication is more than a series of isolated words strung together in speech. As a listener, this same student will concentrate on sounds rather than on the overall content. Emphasizing correct pronunciation through classroom exercises seems counterproductive for many of these students. We have had better success when we have sought to divert attention away from production awareness. By focusing instead on overall communication or on the solving of a puzzle, students are led to see that communication is a process

composed of all the parts - sounds, words, structures, meanings, functions, etc.

How do we do this? One successful method has been the use of the strip story. The strip story technique consists of breaking down a story sentence by sentence and typing each sentence on an individual strip of paper. These sentence strips are then randomly distributed to the students. The students' task is to communicate the contents of their strips to the others in the class and in so doing, to orally reassemble the strips, putting the sentences of the story into a logical sequence. The advantage of this as a technique is that the focus is shifted from pronunciation of words to communication of the content. With this shift moreover, comes the realization that incorrect pronunciation or phrasing really does affect meaningful communication. Goaded by the noncomprehension of their peers, students can make substantial inroads into more acceptable speaking without focusing on this as a goal.

There are several pluses in using strip stories with the Indochinese students in Group Three. These include the facts that:

1. each student is communicating one piece of information essential to the completion of the class project and yet this communicative demand is balanced by having the sentence to be communicated written down;
2. with strip stories the students must really listen to each other;
3. strip stories provide for lively yet directed group

discussions;

4. in a class of mixed levels it is possible to include all at their level of proficiency by giving easier sentences to the less proficient, doubling up on one sentence if a student cannot function alone, etc.

All of the techniques that we have discussed are not meant to suggest that it is an easy task to help the Indochinese student learn English. However, all of these techniques do attempt to match the given; that is, the unique needs of the students in each group, with the most apprpriate methods for bringing about language growth.

Many of the techniques described have been incorporated into the ESL textbooks and articles we have written. These include:

"Adding a Notional/Functional Dimension to Listening," *TESOL Newsletter*, February, 1980

Alice Blows a Fuse: Fifty Strip Stories in American English Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980

"A New Look at Pictures," *TESOL Newsletter*, April, 1979

Before Book One: Listening Activities for Pre-beginning Students of English Regents Publishing Company, Inc., 1982

"Communication Strips," *TESOL Newsletter*, September, 1978

Connections: Communicative Listening and Speaking Activities Regents Publishing Company, Inc., 1981